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For Wilma
with admiration
and affection
Amy

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A HISTORY OF
THE SOCIETY OF CONNECTICUT CRAFTSMEN

1935 - 1955

O F F I C E R S
of the Society of
CONNECTICUT CRAFTSMEN

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President

Mr. Wilson S. Dakin	1935-1939
Rev. Elmer T. Thienes	1939-1946
Mr. Evan F. Kullgren	1946-1952
Mr. Henry Pasco	1952-1954
Miss Emily Hopson	1954-

Editor

Mrs. Alberta Pfeiffer 1947-

Assistant Editor

Miss Wilma Keyes 1953-

Field Secretary

Mr. Leonard S. Rankin
Miss Mariana Armstrong
Miss Elizabeth Titcomb
Mr. Alexander Crane
Mr. Wilson S. Dakin

Recording Secretary

Mrs. Margaret Kapteyn 1949-1950
Miss Helen Haselton 1950-1952
Miss Kay White 1952-1954
Mrs. Thomas Skirm 1954-

Assistant Secretary

Mrs. Watson Woodford 1950-

Vice President

Mrs. Harold G. Holcombe
Mr. W. Gayer Dominick
Mr. Leonard S. Rankin

Mrs. Alberta Pfeiffer - -1952
Mrs. Amy Wertheimer 1952-1953
Miss Emily Hopson 1953-1954
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Mr. Francis P. Webb

Mrs. Leslie Cone - -1952
Mr. W. G. Fitch 1952-1953
Mr. Kenneth Wheeler 1953-1954
Miss Bertha Pabst 1954-

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HONORARY MEMBERS

Mrs. Beatrice Auerbach Mrs. Myra Rankin
Mr. Linton S. Crandall Mr. Evan F. Kullgren

THE SOCIETY OF CONNECTICUT CRAFTSMEN

1935 --- 1955

IT IS VERY NATURAL FOR THOSE WHO MAKE things to enjoy getting together. To create an organization of people who make things is an achievement that the Society of Connecticut Craftsmen has been proud of for twenty years. This has been an achievement not only of people getting together but particularly of people getting things done. When a private organization accomplishes all that this one has, it is gratifying to go back into the history to discover how all this has developed and who made it possible. Undoubtedly, it goes back more than twenty years to the crafts tradition that is as old as New England itself when native materials were converted into utilitarian objects. This organization reflects an earlier tradition for thrift and ingenuity that devised double-sided wooden plates to be turned over for pie on one side only after the johnnycake and baked beans had been cleaned up on the other. The fact that necessity fostered inventiveness was proven by the productivity of our forefathers whose household articles were the handcrafts of a pioneering nation. Witness the museum collections and restoration centers of today. People stand fascinated by the ingenuity of those pioneering forefathers who construed from native materials articles we would be proud of today - a door hinge or a porringer; a spoonholder or a chest of drawers; all attest to the kind of perceptive people New England consisted of. Paul Revere may have made one kind of history by riding a horse alone one Spring night a couple of hundred years ago, but his silverware will ever remain an inspiration to every generation of silversmiths. The tale of Connecticut's wooden "nutmegs" carved by a native farmer from his own trees to hoodwink colonial housewives may not be the origin of today's wooden ware but it has given spice to Connecticut's craftsmanship or craftiness, whichever one prefers to call it. Nick Disbrowe of Hartford was cabinetmaker par excellence before seventeen hundred. His sunflower carvings on oak chests have been an inspiration to his successors who have made the Connecticut Chest a special name in cabinet making.

In 1935, THREE CENTURIES OF THE Nutmeg State's History were celebrated. A unique feature of this tercentenary was an exhibit of Connecticut cabinetmaking held in Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum. It was assembled by Luke Vincent Lockwood, a national authority on early Americana. It included rare pieces of furniture and furnishings up to 1810 when this industry was particularly active in the state. Here was wood, frequently of native origin, shaped and joined by craftsmen whose signature frequently appeared on chests, chairs and tables. Here was craftsmanship becoming a native tradition in Connecticut, not only in the use of wood but in other materials, such as tin, brass and silver. It is true that Connecticut has witnessed the conversion of the one-man-shop into the factory and on into the industrial plant where machinemade products make Connecticut known around the world. Still, this state has never relinquished its love for the individual craftsman who creates original ideas, initiates trends and devises new ways of operating. Here is evidence of Connecticut's early training in using a two-sided plate; one for the individual craftsman, the other for machine production. It is surprising how many machine operators there are now who use their home workshop for creative activity.

THE FIRST DECADE

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In 1935, THE SOCIETY OF CONNECTICUT CRAFTSMEN was formed. How much the Tercentenary Exhibit of early craftsmanship had to do with the formation of a Twentieth Century version of Yankee craftsmanship can only be guessed. There is no doubt but that the vision of certain people and the continued hard work of many is responsible for the success of this organization. The charter members comprised a small company of craftsmen who were brought together by Leonard Rankin and his wife, Myra. Both were crafts experts from the New York Society of Craftsmen. In taking up residence in Connecticut, they realized the value of organization. What is more, they could foresee many of the potentials that exist today. It was the Rankins who were largely responsible for formulating the aims and activities of the present Society. Mention the name of this couple to any early member and you can expect to hear nothing but gratitude and praise for expert assistance and friendly interest. Selflessly this modest pair travelled to all corners of the state, building the framework for the present powerful organization.

THE FIRST ACTIVITY OF THIS NEW Society was an exhibit. It was held in the same art museum in Hartford that featured the Tercentenary showing of furniture; the Wadsworth Atheneum. How natural it was to assemble crafts done by living members of the State in 1936, one year after the historical showing. Here was Connecticut's future heritage. To most of the visitors at this show, it was a revelation to discover how many craftsmen operated in one's home state. We do not know how many of these visitors resolved to be craftsmen after seeing this exhibit but we do know what was written about it in the newspapers:

"The exhibit which is being held under the auspices of the newly organized Society of Connecticut Craftsmen has been arranged, to show what is being done by experienced artists, and what may be done by those who are looking for some means of self expression. The organization will provide instruction in design, finish and marketing of craft-work. Its intent is to help people occupy free time, supplement their earning power and have adequate opportunity for expression in the arts."

Here then was another kind of pioneering. The purchasing public was given an opportunity to recognize and patronize a private enterprise composed of people formerly unknown.

THE NEXT YEAR, 1937, MARKED THE SECOND important activity. This time it was a national exhibit in Washington, D. C. giving special recognition to hand arts from the rural areas of the country. It commemorated the Department of Agriculture's seventy-fifth year of existence. Connecticut's newly formed society was well represented and many of those who exhibited are still prominent. Myra Rankin, Donn Sheets, Luman Kelsey and Dorothy Walden were some of them.

Reverend Elmer Thienes, who was to become the Society's second president, broadcast an appeal to Connecticut people to recognize their local craftsmen in 1937:

"All over Connecticut her craftsmen of an earlier day have literally left the products of their skill to make our life of this day the richer and we are

more and more appreciating the beauty and the worth of their work. Today Connecticut craftsmen are still carrying on with the same skill, the same originality, the same creative instinct. How much more do people prefer something made by some individual they know -- by hand -- to something wrought by machine. There is a difference in character, an originality in design, a character and quality all its own. There are men and women with the will to create and the skill to do beautiful things whose soul is in their hands as the artist's is."

These words carried much the same message as Roy Hilton's did in a national magazine of that day:

"America does not need less machinery but it needs more civilization --- not slavish duplicates but more hand wrought things of every sort."

SALES ARE THE NATURAL OUTCOME OF making products and exhibiting them. As early as May 1937, Mr. and Mrs. B. F. Andrews shared their Hartford home for the sale of hand wrought things and as the permanent headquarters of the Society. This circumstance of having permanent headquarters has never existed since. Sales, however, have extended into various parts of the State. Beginning sales were conducted in the summer, though many were established in the fall or as per-Christmas opportunities. Important among the early activities were the sales held prior to 1940 in Granby at the James Lee Loomis estate and in Norfolk at Battell House. In 1942, the sales at Battell House had to be cancelled because of gasoline rationing. The process of collecting items for these sales constituted a survey not only of available craftsmen but of the opportunities for crafts production. Important in this respect is the leadership of Mr. and Mrs. Rankin. They had rare insight in predicting needs and fostering the human values of creativity. Too much cannot be said in praise of their devotion, friendliness and encouragement. The Society stands today as a monument to their vision.

I was first introduced to the Rankins in 1940 when they were organizing sales outlets during National Art Week. We conducted a sale in Storrs, so did New London, New Milford, Stamford and Hartford. I recall how trucks from the State's Federal Art Project delivered the crafts items that had been assembled by Mr. Rankin, as Field Secretary of the Society. The amount of crafts offered at this sale was sizeable and varied and showed evidence of the survey which W. S. Dakin, as first president of the Society, reported on in 1937. In that two year survey, Mr. Dakin stated that a large number of craftsmen were working in isolated areas of the state unknown to the purchasing public and with no opportunity for criticism or instruction. Mr. Dakin retired as President in 1939, but not as an active coordinator. Through his knowledge of the state as Rural Supervisor of the State Department of Education and because of his deep interest in the growth of the society, Mr. Dakin was able to bring about the cooperation of the State Department of Education and the Society of Connecticut Craftsmen.

EDUCATION FOR CRAFTSMEN WAS FEATURED in the first decade of the organization's growth much as it continued to be in the last. The Y.M.C.A. and the State Department of Education figure largely in this. Elmer Thienes was the Secretary of the Hartford Y.M.C.A., and President of the Society from 1939 to 1946. The State Department of Education, The State Development Commission and the Governor were alerted by officers of the Society regarding some form of cooperative action as early as 1940. Governor Cross commended the crafts society on New London Day in 1937:

"I am in hearty accord with the aims of the Society

of Connecticut Craftsmen, Inc. which has just established headquarters at 762 Farmington Avenue in West Hartford. This organization has sensed the need of an outlet for handmade articles of many kinds, produced by people living for the most part in our outlying districts, and not able to secure other employment and I hope it will meet with eager cooperation on all sides."

In 1945 The Commissioner of Education, Dr. Alonzo Grace, outlined the State program for cooperative action with the Society of Connecticut Craftsmen.

1. Appointment of a field worker.
2. Reorganization of Vinal Technical School as a demonstration center for Arts and Crafts, Industrial and Fine Arts.
3. Development of production or sales program.
4. Development of specialized training opportunity in several sections of the State.
5. Provision for use of qualified members of arts and crafts groups.
6. Improvement of Arts and Crafts programs in schools.

In that same year, the first Educational Program was inaugurated by the State Board of Education. A director was appointed to carry out an educational program beginning with Vinal School in Middletown as a war rehabilitation service. Since then, Mr. Kenneth Lundy has conducted a total of ten summer workshops all except the first having been held in Willimantic at the State Teachers College. This annual workshop is considered to be one of the best in the country thereby attracting an increasing number of out-of-state craftsmen. The Crafts Society and the Department of Education of Connecticut have cooperated well, neither one having lost its identity in a service to the state.

In the fall of 1938, Leonard Rankin reported the needs of the field. These are timely enough today to bear repeating:

1. District Organization
2. Development of local units
3. Regional meetings
4. Aid in design of saleable products
5. Traveling exhibits
6. Publicity
7. A Directory of Members

His estimation of the value of crafts were ---

1. Satisfaction of the individual
2. Increased income from sales and the satisfaction of producing something of value to others.
3. Social values within a community working as a group with common interests.

These statements are the outcome of the team-work and clear thinking of Mr. Rankin, Mr. Dakin and Mr. Thienes whose combined efforts were so dedicated to this organization. On occasions when the society would have otherwise been abandoned, the loyalty and esteem that was felt by the members toward these men was the basis for continuing the organization. Mr. Thienes extended his term as president at a great sacrifice to his health. Mr. Dakin became Field Secretary at a time when the future of the society depended upon his services.

1940 WAS AN ACTIVE YEAR AND AN important one for the Society. War in Europe was making it impossible to import craft items so American products were more in demand. Important cornerstones were laid and the members were shouldering great responsibilities and initiating momentous plans. President Thienes summed it up at that year's Annual Meeting:

"The Society is primarily a recognition of the importance of conserving human values inherent in the crafts, - creativeness, - beauty, - originality - skill. It represents not only the maintenance of a great tradition but a stimulus to make that creative impulse vital for the present day A great faith and a lot of hard work has made this possible."

At that same meeting Richard Bach, a speaker from New York's Metropolitan Museum expressed his philosophy:

"The spirit of craftsmanship involves something more than your individual feeling about it. It involves your relationship with other craftsmen --- a pulling together to advance something essential --- New England can be an artistic producing center."

By 1940, the isolated craftsmen of the state who were previously unknown to each other or to the purchasing public were achieving recognition. The first directory of members was issued in the form of a map. In one corner, there appeared the seal which had been adopted by the society. It is significant that Myra Rankin designed this seal for it served on tags, seals and stationery wherever identification was required. Recently the seal has been revised to include the founding date, 1935. This has been a twentieth anniversary contribution of Florence Pettit who has carefully retained the original conception of the tree in the circle with the words Function, Material, Design.

The war years were difficult ones. Funds were exceedingly low and the finances of the society suffered. Too much can never be said for those friends of the society who rescued it from its financial crisis. War production sapped all crafts materials and manpower to such a degree that most of the activities of the society were suspended from 1941 to 1946. Those craftsmen who did meet were apt to be in uniform or in assembly line production. Fortunately for the crafts movement, the Worcester Art Museum initiated a New England Crafts Exhibit in 1943. This did much for the prestige of crafts in New England. So did Allen Eaton's book which was published concurrently. In New York, 1943 marked the inception of an organization that fostered national recognition of handcrafts. This was the American Craftsmen's Educational Council which Connecticut's society affiliated with. This organization founded the bimonthly magazine, Crafts Horizons to which some of Connecticut craftsmen have contributed articles. This is also the headquarters of America House, a gallery museum and retail shop where certain of our members reach a national clientele.

THE SECOND DECADE

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THE NEXT TEN YEARS OF THE SOCIETY have witnessed a revival of crafts so vast and with so much ardor as to almost run away with itself. The business carried on at Directors' meetings has had to be accelerated by Evan Kullgren, Henry Pasco and Emily Hopson, presiding presidents since 1946. The Bulletin, "Connecticut Craftsman" has become increasingly vital as a means of recording activities and of keeping members informed. Its fame has spread to non-members who have become regular subscribers. The success of this bulletin is due to one person - the editor, Alberta Pfeiffer, Architect of Hadlyme, who has devoted untold hours of writing and attending meetings and reporting events. What reflects is the kind of spirit and indomitable vision of the society's founders. The Bulletin IS Alberta Pfeiffer. Little did she suspect that Volume One, Number One in 1947 would develop into Volume Nine under her editorship. Certainly the current printed and illustrated monthly volume is a gigantic forward step since the first Bulletin was mimeographed in 1939.

After the war, there was a revival of interest in sales of craftsmen's wares. City centers proved to be the most popular and Hartford the most central. Donchian's and Sage Allen's were generous with their space. However, it is the Centinel Hill Hall of G. Fox & Company that has formally been the location of the Society's Annual Fair. Since 1947, the attractive setting and friendly atmosphere of craftsmen personally selling their wares is an experience no shopper ever forgets. Mrs. Auerbach, President of the store, assigns her display experts each year to provide the kind of settings that do great justice to all the crafts products.

It is extraordinary how continued encouragement released a flood of craft products too numerous for a single sale. Shop outlets were the only answer, and the past five years have witnessed the opening of many. Prominent in the western part of the State, is the popularity of the Winsted Craft Shop created by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Parsons in their Main Street home. It has become a happy hunting ground for crafts. In fact, The Parsons have generated an interest in craft products far beyond the matter of being representatives of the Society. It is unfortunate that this shop happened to be in the center of the most devastating floods of 1955. It's gratifying to have the shop opened anew and to know that the crafts items were saved from the deluge. Other shops sponsored by the Society have been Bridgeport and Hebron in particular, the latter having served for two summers in the eastern region of the state, thanks to Evan Kullgren's initial efforts. The combined sales of crafts of our society have climbed from \$6600 in 1951; \$12,400 in 1952; \$19,000 in 1953; \$22,000 in 1954; and every indication for a similar gain in 1955 returns.

All this sales activity has created merchandizing and marketing problems along with the need for standards. Emily Hopson, the present President has sponsored committees for improving standards and merchandising. She was responsible for bringing the New York designer, Freda Diamond, to present a challenging future for craftsman at an annual meeting.. After several previous issues, a Handbook of Craft Standards was organized and printed under the direction of Helen Haselton. This has been surprisingly popular both in and out of the state as a convenience in checking and judging the merits of any crafts item.

The past ten years have witnessed many special activities too numerous to mention, but Society-sponsored scholarships are of great importance educationally. President Henry Pasco launched this activity in 1954. In the two years these scholarships have been granted, seven members have been selected as recipients. Some have attended the Crafts Workshop in Willimantic, others, the Brookfield Crafts Center of Nancy DuBois.

Regional group meetings have been particularly active. A central program chairman has kept in touch with regional activities and has provided speakers from within the organization. These regional meetings are spontaneous gatherings bounded by no geographical lines where those of similar interests gravitate. They are not tightly organized groups, as some expect, but neighborly get-togethers. Conversation usually centers around crafts and the ways and means of operating. Frequently there is a program with discussions of organization, design and standards; or it may be a craftsman demonstrating, or a professional who injects a new point of view.

Recent years have witnessed the organization of the New England Crafts Council; an interstate representation of crafts groups who benefit by each other's experiences. Connecticut has served as host for two of their crafts seminars; one in jewelry, the other, enameling. Certain Connecticut craftsmen have crossed into neighboring states to demonstrate their superior accomplishments. All of these seminars have been enthusiastically attended.

Further evidence of the interchange of craftsmanship is apparent on a national basis. Without doubt, Designer-Craftsmen U.S.A. - 1953, proved to be a most important collective achievement as it travelled to museums across the nation bringing Connecticut craftsmen their share of acclaim. This is a tribute not only to the contemporary crafts movement but to the state organizations that made it possible. It is not surprising that some members of this organization are able to receive full support financially from their crafts accomplishments.

IN TRACING THIS HISTORY OF Connecticut's Craft Society, there is one remaining activity of singular importance, not only for its own membership, but for its link with the larger national movement which is closing the gap that separates the artist from the craftsman. This is the juried show where the craftsman's work is exhibited on a par with that of the artist in art centers and museums. The first of these crafts prestige shows were held in 1952, 1953 and 1954 in the Silvermine Guild in Norwalk. The first one was entitled "The Living Arts" favoring only the contemporary style. This caused some confusion among the craftsmen since contemporary as a style could not be clearly defined. It remained for Alberta Pfeiffer, as Chairman of this activity, to assume the responsibility of writing personal letters to many craftsmen to explain the position of the jurors who had rejected excellent items that were too traditional in character. This must have acted as a great stimulant toward increasing creativity on the part of all members if one can judge by the 1955 spring exhibit in New Britain's Art Institute, "Handcrafts in Today's Living". An overwhelming quantity of superbly designed articles for home use attracted crowds of visitors. One heard ecstatic remarks exchanged, such as, "I did not know you had it in you" and "Can you believe all this?" Connecticut is proud to be a part of the New England Crafts Exhibit in the Worcester Art Museum. It's proud of the fact that it coincides with the twentieth anniversary exhibit of our own.

There is every reason to believe that the anniversary show celebrating two decades of society growth must be a crowning achievement at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford; the birthplace of that first exhibit. It will be historically important to honor those charter members who twenty years ago founded this Society of Connecticut Craftsmen that is a credit to its Connecticut Yankee heritage. It is equally important to honor those members who today are attaining eminence that will remain a cultural inspiration to future generations.

Wilma Keyes

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This History
is dedicated to
THE CHARTER MEMBERS
of the
Society of
Connecticut Craftsmen

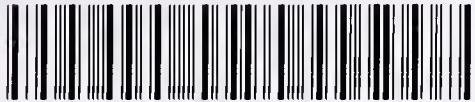
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- Mrs. Edna Anderson
Mr. Thomas Belden
Mrs. Elma A. Clark
Mrs. Adelaide Crandall
Mr. Lenton Crandall
Mr. Wilson S. Dakin
Miss M. W. Freethy
Mr. James L. Goodwin
Mr. Luman Kelsey
Mrs. R. W. Moyle
Mr. Leonard Rankin
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